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AUTHOR Tabbert, Russell
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ABSTRACT

The term "village English" has been used by a number of people to label the English used by Alaskan natives. The term appears in discussions of educational problems and often the phenomenon is cited as a significant reason for the lower than expected achievement of Alaskan school children. It is suggested that statements about "village English" are based on the unproven claims that "village English" exists, that it hinders learning in the schools, and that it originates through native language interference during the process of acquiring English. It is hypothesized that many "village Englishes" exist because of the many village dialects. The need for studying the language interference on schoolroom learning is emphasized because, it is suggested, language differences often bear too much of the burden of educational failures. In discussing the third claim of native language interference during English acquisition, it is suggested that Alaskans learn a more or less independent system of English through normal processes of language acquisition. When patterns differ from those of standard English, it should not be assumed that they result only from linguistic interference in learning English. The patterns may well be part of that village's dialect of English, which differs systematically from other dialects. The following set of assumptions are offered as alternatives to the common ones: (1) "village English" is actually "Englishes," (2) these varieties differ superficially, rather than significantly, from other dialects of English, and (3) the features of the English used by village children are acquired as a result of learning an established dialect rather than created as a result of native language interference. (Author/NCR)

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Russell Tabbert
Dept. of English
University of Alaska
Fairbanks, Alaska 99701
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Some Assumptions About "Village English" in Alaska

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The term "village English" has been used by a number of people to label the English used by Alaska Natives. Often the term appears in discussions of educational problems, and often the phenomenon is cited as a significant reason for the lower than expected achievement of Native school children. Typically also the stated or tacit assumption is that "village English" results from the interference of the Native language structures during the process of learning English.

I would like to suggest that none of these claims has been demonstrated, and that at least one of them is open to question. The assumptions are, again,

1. that "village English" exists,
2. that it hinders learning in the schools, and
3. that it originates through Native language interference during the process of acquiring English.

I want to hypothesize that this third one is perhaps an oversimplification. But first some comments on the other two.

It must be the case that something like "village English" exists, if for no other proof than that so many people have said it does. But so far we have very little specific information about its features. The few generalizations which are occasionally offered are stated vaguely in terms

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of "omissions" or "deviations" from formal edited English. Though some kind of contrastive presentation may eventually be useful, we first need detailed descriptions of the varieties being compared. This means, I think, that we will have to forget the unity implied by "village English" and conceive the possibility of many village dialects. We need autonomous descriptions of the local varieties based on data carefully gathered from actual use. Then we will be in a better position to assess the unity or diversity in Alaska Native English and to compare these varieties systematically with those which the texts and the teachers actually use.

Even if "village English" does clearly exist, the claim that it interfers significantly with schoolroom learning also needs to be demonstrated. I think that especially linguists and other language professionals should insist on this, for I sense the tendency to make language difference bear too much of the burden for educational failures. Obviously many other causes may contribute to the problems, including some, such as inappropriate curriculum, substandard facilities, and incompetent teachers, which should be much easier to alter than language structure. The situation would seem to be especially delicate now during the period when educators are attempting to implement the Lau decision. The concept of language interference seems to be available to explain below norm achievement for even monolinguial English children who are judged, perhaps too impressionistically and on the basis of a few superficial features, to speak nonstandard English. The danger is that special programs for such pupils may then be set up which concentrate on attempting to alter a few diagnostic features (eg. third person singular present verb ending, "irregular" past and past participle verb

forms, negative concord, etc.). When subsequent standardized testing shows that the pupils are still below norm, the language arts program, and perhaps the whole bilingual/bicultural program, may be subject to severe and undeserved criticism.

The two claims that I have touched on so far--that "village English" exists and that it interfers--are synchronically based and currently important. They could be proved or disproved through appropriate research conducted in the speech communities. The third claim--that "village English" results from Native language interference during English acquisition--is perhaps more remotely theoretical and would require some historical research.

When people with different languages are in contact and want to communicate, they have available at least these two possibilities:

1. Because of the dominating position or domineering attitude of one group, speakers from the other may attempt to piece out their side of communication in the words which they hear used at them. The resulting patterns are usually called "broken," as for example, "broken English." If the contacts between the two groups continue, such patterns of "broken speech" may be adopted by more and more individuals, both in the subordinated group as well as the dominating one. We can call such an ad hoc contact language a makeshift language. When a makeshift language continues in use over an extended period of time, becoming increasingly systematized and being transmitted to new speakers, it may be termed a pidgin language.[1]

[1] A pidgin language remains restricted to those domains involving intergroup contact. It is nobody's native language. When a pidgin begins displacing the native language in intra-group domains, it is being creolized. A creol language is a pidgin which has become the native language of a group.

2. Another possibility for communication is that the two groups in contact may find that there is a third language which they both know, which can then serve as a lingua franca. The lingua franca may be the full language of a third culture which both groups have had close contact with. Or it may be a makeshift version of a third language resulting from only marginal command of it by one or both groups. Or the lingua franca may be a pidgin language which one or both groups know as a result of other contact situations in which a pidgin was the vehicle of minimal communication.

I would like to suggest that when educators and linguists are considering the English of Alaska Native school children we should not assume that it has no historical depth. Contacts with English speakers began well over 100 years ago for some groups, and most groups have had increasingly frequent contacts for several generations. Thus it would seem highly unlikely that the English which most children bring to the classroom is a "makeshift" language recreated from their own attempts to approximate a foreign speech. It seems more likely that they learn a more or less independent system of English through the normal processes of language acquisition, especially from older children.

Therefore, when we find patterns which differ from those of standard English we probably should not assume that they result simply and only from linguistic "interference" in that child's (or generation's) learning of English. The patterns may well be part of that village's dialect of English, which differs systematically from other dialects, including standard varieties. Of course some of the differences may be explainable

historically from interference when speakers in the early contacts were first learning English. And those differences may be reinforced by the child's knowledge of the Native language. Thus, contrastive analysis of the Native language, the "village English," and standard English may perhaps be helpful in learning how some of the patterns originated and which ones are being reinforced.

However, it may be that not all features of a particular "village English" can be accounted for by even this expanded notion of interference. Some of them may be features of the particular variety of English which a group was early exposed to and which were incorporated into the system learned by them. These then were transmitted to succeeding generations. It would be very useful to have histories of white/Native contact for individual villages and larger areas in order to try to estimate the kinds of English (and other languages) that villagers heard and were taught.

The approach to constructing such histories of linguistic contact would be to examine the written accounts of explorers, travelers, missionaries, teachers, and government officials, noting the periods of contact, the varieties of English most likely used, and any specific comments about the linguistic situation. Also important would be the history of white commercial contacts, such as trading, whaling, fishing, mining, and trapping. And of course the history of formal education in the village could presumably be determined from official records. An important source of information about all of these would be the recollections of the older people of the village.

I would like to suggest that Alaskan educators and linguists who are dealing with "village English" should do so, at least for now, with the following set of assumptions:

1. "Village English" is actually Englishes.
2. These varieties differ superficially, rather than significantly, from other dialects of English.
3. The features of the English used by village children are acquired as a result of learning an established dialect rather than created anew as the result of Native language interference.
4. Historically, the features of the "village Englishes" may have originated in
    a) the makeshift English which developed in early contacts,
    b) pre-existing pidgin English used by whites in early contacts,
    c) interference from the Native language in post-contact acquisition of English,
    d) the various regional and social dialects of English which have served as models in the villages.

It seems to me that these are the most probable explanations of the nature and sources of "village Englishes." The claims should, of course, be tested through research. But until demonstrated to be wrong, they represent the safest base for designing the English language arts curriculum in that they assume the availability of a systematic dialect of English adequate for the child's needs in the village. The task of the schools, then, is to build on this base by providing an English

curriculum both relevant and rich so that the child's capabilities and confidence in English grow as his or her needs for more sophisticated English grow.

I do not mean that nonstandard features of "village Englishes" should be ignored. But they most certainly should not be the focus of the English curriculum, especially through repetitive drilling to eliminate insignificant differences. The task of polishing productive control of formal standard English should be subordinate, long term, and integrated into the total curriculum. We must not allow dialect differences to be the excuse for our failure to design appropriate curricula and to teach them successfully.